

Ayatori Reflections

Owen Smith – dance

When I first saw the work being produced by En-Rapport, Yuriko and Ed, in the early days of Ayatori's conception I immediately noticed a connection between the sound and image-scapes being created and the creative practice I'd been developing as an arts' practitioner with young autistic people at Riverside School, a special school in north London. As I learned more about Ayatori I realised the connection went deeper; the very essence of Ayatori reflected the dynamic of the practice I'd been developing.

The nature of the students I work with - individuals who don't use spoken language to communicate - precludes working creatively with form and figuration. Together we explore the abstract and pre-form; whether in the visual, sonic or bodily arts. I'd called the bodily arts practice we were engaged in Dance Unfolding.

Drawing on contact improvisation and the somatic practice of Skinner Releasing Technique, Dance Unfolding sought to create a space in which improvisatory physical play could become dialogic, during which embodied conversations emerge and dissolve, appear and disappear. A space in which co-created dances appear and disappear. Closer to the Hindu concept of Nataraja, the cosmic dance of creation and dissolution, Dance Unfolding wasn't about physicalised metaphors, choreographed steps, shapes and routines. Rather, it's a cat's cradle, a call and response; essentially, a game of embodied Ayatori.

I was delighted when Keith contacted me, asking if I'd be interested in taking part in the Ayatori Residency with my students. While that would have been the ideal scenario for my participation, the logistics that would be involved in supporting them, as well as ethical issues at stake - including: in relation to their ability to communicate their choice to take part, the disruption to familiar routines some might find challenging, and the relatively short time span during which we'd be involved – ruled out that option. We discussed the possibility of involving students from a local special school but again, there were multiple issues that also made that impossible within the available timeframe.

Essentially, Dance Unfolding sessions represent facilitated excursions into the sensory worlds of individuals diagnosed as neurodivergently autistic. I decided a potential working compromise might be to work with Falmouth University dance students who identify as neurodivergent: to explore what that meant to them; how it shaped, impacted and enhanced their practices as dance artists; what it meant in relation to their experience of sensory receptivity and attenuation; how that could

be utilised in improvisatory contexts and how this might manifest in a live interplay with Ayatori. A manifestation in which the cat's cradle becomes a multi-dimensional call and response between everything and everyone in the space, and everything emanating from it, in each moment; a multi-layered improvisation, and dynamic co-creation.

Inspired by Pauline Oliveros's practice of quantum listening, and extending the practice I'd been developing, I'd been exploring the idea of quantum touch with the young people and teaching assistants I work with. The opportunity to bring this into an action research context, alongside and in direct relation to En-Rapport's Ayatori project, was exciting. Particularly given the resonances I'd felt when I'd discovered the project in its earliest days. The aim, to explore neurodivergent sensory attributes in a research context focusing on dance and improvisation, and in relation to Ayatori, was fed into the residency application and, I understand, well received.

Unfortunately, however, while the aim was acknowledged and validated, the onerous process for student participation and recruitment onto the residency possibly acted as a barrier to the participation of the cohort we sought. For what was undoubtedly a variety of reasons, the dancers I had hoped to engage with didn't materialise.

An alternative plan was to adapt and share something of my practice; exploring the multi-faceted sensory experiences of each moment in the body, and its responses, expressed through dance. However, due to a number of reasons, including a clash with Graduation ceremonies, the dance element of the residency wasn't able to begin until the residency was into its second week.

Unfortunately, the truncated time available was inadequate to make and assimilate the research opportunity I'd hoped for. An overriding sense of pressure to produce a performance, in relation to Ayatori, from others involved in the dance component seemed to take hold on the first day of our working together. This context skewed the direction I'd hoped to take, with the dance element taking on the character of interpretation rather than response; a preconceived patterning of the cat's cradle rather than an unfolding in response to the totality of the sensory experiences happening in each moment, which would have more closely aligned with the practice I'd been developing.

Despite this, the outcomes remained rewarding on a number of levels. It was useful to witness bodies moving in the space created by the audio-visual material. Even though those dancing bodies weren't engaged in the ways I'd hoped for, they highlighted possibilities. The experience re-confirmed my sense that the work I'd been developing had creative value, and that the marginal context in which it tends to take place shouldn't be allowed to obscure this. It inspired me to

introduce Ed and Yuriko's audio-visuals into the work; exploring how we respond in the context of the neurodivergent-inspired practice of Dance Unfolding and opening out Ayatori's dialogue to incorporate this.